THE DAUGHTER OF A WEALTHY MERCHANT FAMILY...
...SHE WAS SAID TO HAVE A PLEASANT NATURE, PROMPTING HIS IMPERIAL MAJESTY TO CALL ON HER.
BUT TWO YEARS AGO, AROUND THIS TIME OF YEAR...
...AN ILLNESS LEFT HER FACE COVERED IN RED SORES AND CAUSED HER HAIR TO FALL OUT.
THE WOMAN BEHIND THE UPROAR WAS A LOW-RANKING CONSORT.
Chapter 45
SHE CONTINUES TO RECEIVE A STIPEND FROM THE INNER COURT, PROBABLY DUE TO THE EMPEROR'S COMPASSION.
FINDING A HUSBAND OUTSIDE OF THE PALACE WOULD LIKELY HAVE BEEN IMPOSSIBLE FOR HER, EVEN IF SHE HAD RETURNED HOME.
IT WOULD BE NATURAL TO ASSUME THAT LADY JIN WAS BEHIND THE WOMAN'S ILLNESS.
...BEHAVE AS SHE DID AT LADY JIN'S FUNERAL?
SO THE QUES-TION IS, WHY WOULD A LOW-RANKING CONSORT LIKE HER...

AND...
...THE SORES PRESENT ON BOTH THE LOWER CONSORT AND LADY JIN'S CORPSE...
...ARE SYMPTOMATIC OF A CERTAIN SOMETHING.
Chapter 43 Corpse Fungus ②

THIS MUSHROOM IS DEADLY POISONOUS.
I FOUND IT IN A THICKET IN THE GROUNDS TO THE NORTH.
RUSTLE
A TINY FRAGMENT OF IT IS ENOUGH TO BE FATAL IF INGESTED.
THE FOUL THING IS EVEN TOXIC TO THE TOUCH.
IT GROWS AROUND DEAD BROADLEAF TREES.

THAT THICKET, LEFT TO GROW WILD FOR YEARS AND YEARS...
...MUST'VE PROVIDED THE IDEAL ENVIRONMENT FOR THIS MUSHROOM TO THRIVE IN.
IT DIDN'T CATCH MY EYE RIGHT AWAY SINCE IT SPROUTS UP SO RARELY...
...BUT CONSIDERING HOW LETHAL IT IS, I'M GLAD I WAS ABLE TO FIND IT.
DO AVOID BRINGING YOUR FACE TOO CLOSE TO IT...
...OR ELSE YOU'LL END UP LOOKING LIKE THIS.
URK!
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I MADE THE MISTAKE OF TOUCHING IT, ONLY TO END UP LIKE SO.
I RINSED OFF RIGHT AWAY...
...BUT THE ANGRY RED SCAR REMAINED.
Y-YOU TOUCHED IT?
YES.
ONCE, LONG AGO, I CAME ACROSS IT WHILE OUT PICKING HERBS WITH MY FATHER.
OH!
I'VE WONDERED AT THESE BANDAGES YOU ALWAYS SEEM TO BE WEARING.
DO THEY HIDE MORE SCARS FROM THAT TIME?
...HMM? HIS FACE LOOKS STRANGELY TENSE.
COME TO THINK OF IT, I HAVEN'T SHOWN THESE TO HIM BEFORE.

GUH! EXPERI-MENTS?!
NO. THESE ARE MERELY SCARS FROM ME EXPERI-MENTING ON MY-SELF.
ANYWAY, THAT'S NOT WHAT'S IMPORTANT HERE RIGHT NOW.
NOT IMPOR-TANT, SHE SAYS...
WHAT KIND OF HOBBY IS THAT?!
IT'S WHAT I LIKE TO DO IN MY SPARE TIME.
I ATTENDED THE FUNERAL OF THE CONSORT LADY JIN YESTERDAY.
HER CORPSE HAD FACIAL BLISTERS, AND HER HAIR HAD FALLEN OUT.
I DARESAY SHE'D BEEN POISONED BY THIS MUSHROOM.

...SHARP AS EVER.
MM.
THAT'S WHAT YOU WISHED TO KNOW, IS IT NOT?
...HER FACE BROKE OUT IN SORES, AND SHE LOST THE ABILITY TO SPEAK COHER-ENTLY.
BUT ONE YEAR AGO ...
GOING BY WHAT JINSHI HAD TO SAY...
AHH!
PERHAPS JEALOUS OF OTHER LOWER CONSORTS WHO CAUGHT THE EMPEROR'S EYE AND HAD THE LUCK TO BE CALLED ON...
SHE DEFINITELY SOUNDS LIKE THE KIND OF PERSON WHO'D POISON CONSORT GYOKUYO.
...SHE'D POISON THEM. IN THE COURSE OF HER REPEATED ATTEMPTS ON THEIR LIVES...
...SHE HERSELF COULD HAVE COME INTO CONTACT WITH THE POISON, DISFIGURING HER OWN FACE.
...THE LATE LADY JIN WAS KNOWN TO WEAR AND ABUSE THE MANTLE OF HER PARENTS' POWER.
THERE WAS NO END TO THE ILL RUMORS ABOUT HER, IT SEEMS.

LADY JIN, GROWING DESPON-DENT BECAUSE OF HER ILLNESS, TURNED MEEK, AN ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT PERSON.
SINCE OTHER LOWER CONSORTS HAD BEEN FELLED BY A SIMILAR MALADY THE YEAR BEFORE...
...SHE WAS GIVEN LEAVE TO REMAIN AT THE INNER COURT AT THE EMPEROR'S DISCRE-TION.
WHICH BRINGS US TO THE LATEST INCIDENT OF FOOD POISON-ING.
ALL OF LADY JIN'S ATTENDANTS UNANIMOUSLY TESTIFIED...
...THAT THE PRIDEFUL CONSORT, UNABLE TO TOLERATE WHAT SHE HAD BECOME...
...TOOK HER LIFE WITH POISON.
THUS YOU WANTED TO KNOW HOW SHE CAME BY THE POISON.
YES.

MM-HMM.
SO THEY'RE CLAIMING LADY JIN ATE THE MUSHROOM AND DIED.
HMM...
BUT THAT DOESN'T ADD UP.
ABDOMINAL PAIN, VOMITING, AND NUMBNESS OCCUR WHEN THIS MUSHROOM IS INGESTED.
IT ALSO CAUSES INFLAMMATION OF THE MOUTH.
BUT I'VE NEVER HEARD OF THAT INFLAMMA-TION...
...SPREADING TO THE FACE.

ARE YOU SURE?
YES.
THE FACIAL BLISTERS ON THE CORPSE APPEARED FRESH.
BUT HER HANDS WERE FREE OF SWELLING.
SHE WOULD'VE HAD TO RUB THE MUSHROOM ON HER FACE TO MAKE THAT HAPPEN.
IF SHE'D BEEN SO DESPERATE TO END HER LIFE...
...I DOUBT SHE'D HAVE BOTHERED WITH GLOVES.
HMM...
I HAVE THE ANSWER, BUT I HAVE NO EVIDENCE TO BACK IT UP.

YANK
WHAT IS IT?
IF THERE'S SOMETHING YOU WANT TO SAY, SAY IT.
...I FEEL I MUST WARN YOU IN ADVANCE ...
...THAT I'M BASING THIS ON A HUNCH.
GAO SHUN?
NOD
WOULD IT ALSO BE POSSIBLE TO REQUEST SEVERAL STRONG, TIGHT-LIPPED EUNUCHS...
...TO ASSIST ME?
COULD YOU GIVE ME A FEW DAYS?
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AS YOU WISH, SIR.
WELL ...
...I GUESS BEING ORDERED TO DO IT MAKES ME FEEL A LITTLE BETTER ABOUT IT.
NO MATTER. DO IT ANYWAY.

A FEW DAYS LATER
VERY WELL.
NOW, THEN. WOULD YOU MIND DIGGING HERE?
SHFF
SHFF
SHFF

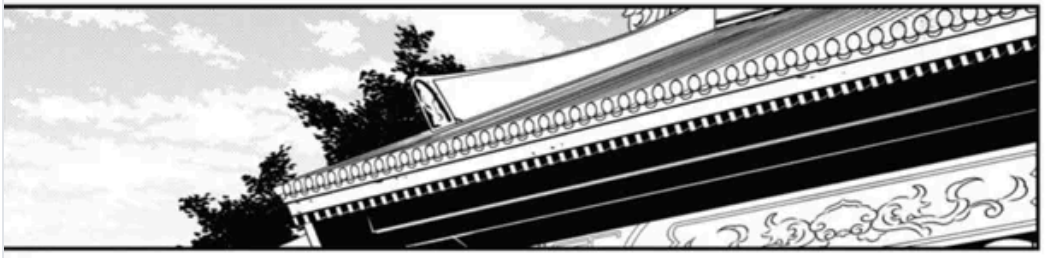
WHAT IS THAT UNHOLY STENCH ?!
REEK...
SHFF
SHFF
SHFF

IS THIS THE EVIDENCE YOU WERE AFTER?

THE CREST INSCRIBED ONTO THESE ORNAMENTS BELONGS TO LADY JIN, DOESN'T IT?
RUSTLE
THIS IS JUST ONE OF THE SPOTS I'D PINPOINTED.
I NEVER THOUGHT WE'D GET IT RIGHT ON THE FIRST TRY.
HOW DID YOU KNOW TO LOOK HERE?
THE MUSHROOM CLUSTERS.
DIFFERENT KINDS OF MUSHROOMS GROW IN DIFFERENT PLACES.
THESE MUSHROOMS WITH THE SLIMY CAPS...
...LIKE GROWING NEAR THE CARCASSES OR EXCREMENT OF ANIMALS.
YOU HARDLY EVER FIND THEM GROWING ELSEWHERE.

I THOUGHT I CAUGHT THE DISTINCT WHIFF OF DECAY COMING FROM AROUND HERE...
...BUT I COULDN'T BE SURE SINCE I MAKE A POINT OF NOT TOUCHING CORPSES.

I WAS CONVINCED IT WAS THE LEAKING WASTE PROVIDING THE MUSHROOMS WITH THE NECESSARY NUTRIENTS...
...BUT IN REALITY, IT WOULD APPEAR I'D BEEN HAPPILY MUSHROOM HUNTING THE SPECIMENS FEASTING ON THIS WOMAN'S CORPSE.



THEN TO WHOM DOES THE CORPSE IN THE COFFIN AT THE FUNERAL BELONG?
LADY JIN DIED A YEAR AGO, AROUND THE TIME THEY SAID SHE CAME DOWN WITH HER ILLNESS.
WHETHER BY MURDER OR ACCIDENT, I DO NOT KNOW.
THEY MUST HAVE THEN BURIED HER WHERE WE FOUND HER.
ONCE I COMPILED EVERYONE'S DESCRIPTIONS OF THE LADY IN QUESTION, THIS IS WHAT I CAME UP WITH.
I ASKED AROUND THE INNER COURT ABOUT HER.
THERE IS CURRENTLY A COURT LADY WHO HAS GONE MISSING.
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NOD
SHE LOOKS STARTLINGLY SIMILAR TO LADY JIN, DOESN'T SHE?
WITH HER FACE DISFIGURED, THE ONLY PEOPLE WHO WOULD BE ABLE TO IDENTIFY LADY JIN...
...WOULD BE HER LADIES-IN-WAITING.
MOREOVER, LADY JIN HAD BEEN ILL AND SHUT UP IN HER ROOMS THIS ENTIRE YEAR.
FOR THE COURT LADY TO TAKE LADY JIN'S PLACE...
...ALL SHE'D HAVE TO DO WAS WRAP HER FACE IN BANDAGES TO HIDE THE SORES SHE WAS MEANT TO HAVE...
...TO FOOL SIR JINSHI DURING HIS PERIODIC VISITS.

I DON'T KNOW THE DETAILS...
...BUT I BELIEVE THAT TO BE A FAIR ASSUMP-TION.
SO YOU'RE SAYING NOT ONLY WERE LADY JIN'S LADIES-IN-WAITING INVOLVED ...
...BUT THE MISSING COURT LADY TOO WAS COMPLICIT IN CONCEALING LADY JIN'S BODY?
...ALL RIGHT.
I'LL INFORM SIR JINSHI.
AS FOR WHY THE COURT LADY WOULD DO SUCH A THING...
...I CAN BUT SPECULATE.

THE DEEPLY JEALOUS LADY JIN...
...WHO HAD NEVER BEEN CALLED ON BY THE EMPEROR, TOOK UMBRAGE AT WORD OF THE COURT LADY WHO SHARED HER FACE...
...BEING COURTED BY A MAN, IN THIS CASE, A GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL.
SHE MEDDLED IN THE COURT LADY'S AFFAIRS, WHICH LED TO AN ALTERCATION...
...WHICH IN TURN, WHETHER BY ACCIDENT OR BY DESIGN, LED TO LADY JIN'S DEATH.
SEEING AS HER LADIES-IN-WAITING WERE OF A MIND TO GET THEIR STORIES STRAIGHT REGARDING THEIR MISTRESS'S CAUSE OF DEATH...
...THEY MUST ALL HAVE INTENSELY DISLIKED LADY JIN.
OUT OF SELF-PRESERVATION AS WELL AS EMPATHY FOR THE COURT LADY...
...THEY DECIDED THEY WOULD FOOL EVERYONE BY HAVING THE CONSORT SUCCUMB TO HER ILLNESS.

AND OUT OF GUILT, THE COURT LADY AGREED TO PLAY THE PART OF LADY JIN.
BUT AS HER MARRIAGE TALKS PROGRESSED...
...IT BECAME INCREASINGLY IMPOSSIBLE FOR HER TO CONTINUE IN LADY JIN'S PLACE.
FEARING THEY WOULD BE FOUND OUT, THE LADIES-IN-WAITING...
...TOOK MATTERS INTO THEIR OWN HANDS BEFORE THE COURT LADY'S TERM OF SERVICE COULD END AND—

I'M SURE PEOPLE MUCH MORE IMPORTANT THAN ME WILL ASSIGN THEIR OWN MOTIVES AND SUCH LATER.
BEST LEAVE IT AT THAT.

モリ…
HEAPING
YES, WHAT IS IT?
MAY I ASK YOU ONE OTHER QUESTION?
.....
WHAT IN THE WORLD ARE YOU PLANNING TO DO WITH ALL THESE MUSHROOMS?

...THERE ARE A GREAT MANY UTTERLY FASCINATING SPECIMENS IN HERE, I'LL HAVE YOU KNOW.
SWSH
AS IN THE KINDS THAT GROW FROM CORPSES?
NO.
I HAVE YET TO FIND ANYTHING AS EXTRAOR-DINARY AS THAT CATER-PILLAR FUNGUS.

BUT IF IT'S OUT THERE, I WOULD DEARLY LOVE TO LAY MY EYES ON IT AT LEAST ONCE.

AND SO, ALL THE MUSHROOMS WERE DISPOSED OF MOST MERCILESSLY.
THE MAJORITY OF PEOPLE CAN'T WRAP THEIR HEADS AROUND PURE, UNADULTERATED CURIOSITY.